

Maine Legislature

House Democratic Office

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REP GRANT: LEPAGE BUDGET THREATENS PUBLIC SCHOOLS, PUSHES OFF RESPONSIBILITY, WILL HIKE TAXES IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Good morning. I'm state Representative Gay Grant. I'm proud to represent District 59 and the people of Gardiner and Randolph.

Strengthening Maine's public schools is a top priority for Democrats in the Legislature. It's an area where we should be able to find common ground with our colleagues on the other side of the aisle.

We should all strive to make our public schools the best they can be. It's good for our communities and, ultimately, for our economy. Most of all, it's the right thing to do.

But our schools are facing a serious threat in Governor Paul LePage's budget. His proposed budget essentially cuts funding to schools by nearly \$40 million dollars over the next two years.

The governor says he's flat funding schools. Even if that were so, it's clear that costs like fuel and health insurance for employees are rising. As a result, our schools would only fall behind.

I was heartened to see that so many people – parents, students and educators – came to the State House recently to stand up for our public schools.

They made their voices heard before the Legislature's budget-writing and education committees.

Among those testifying before the committees was Maggie Stokes, a fifth-grader from Oakland. She talked about how grateful she is to her teachers and how she and her classmates look forward to the librarian reading aloud to them.

But Maggie also spoke about the lack of supplies and equipment, how the students have to be careful not to hurt themselves on the damaged plastic cafeteria chairs and how there aren't enough counselors and aides to deal with behavioral problems like bullying.

The situation Maggie described is not going to improve under the governor's proposed budget.

It's telling that no parents, students or teachers testified in favor of the governor's budget.

One of the big problems in the governor's plan is his shifting of new costs to local school districts. The state has long paid the costs of teacher retirement, but the governor suddenly wants

school districts to cover those costs. Communities would have to come up with millions more to do so.

My community's district – RSU 11 in Gardiner – would be responsible for nearly \$150,000 in teacher retirement costs. Our total loss of state aid would be \$414,000.

The governor's budget pushes off the responsibility of funding our schools – and is leading to a tax hike on our communities. Our communities face the choice of cutting services to students or increasing taxes on middle-class property owners.

In my district, the local administrators' requested budget would require a 13 percent increase from taxpayers in Gardiner, Pittston, Randolph and West Gardiner. School officials are trying to find ways to avoid this tax hike. Our superintendent says cuts are needed to avoid passing on such a large tax increase.

I worry about what this means for our community and our children. Our schools are the hearts of our communities. My roots here are deep – my husband and I both graduated from Gardiner Area High School, I served on the school board and we raised our kids here.

While our local school officials grapple with these dilemmas, Governor LePage continues to push an agenda that siphons money from our public schools. His education summit pushed an agenda that most Mainers reject, one that is tied to for-profit companies.

The governor's proposed budget, for example, includes money for a new "voucher" program -- the same type of program that was routinely rejected by the Legislature, including last year's Republican-led Legislature.

The governor's education conference also featured questionable initiatives from former Florida Governor Jeb Bush's Foundation in Education. The group is backed by for-profit corporations -- specifically virtual charter schools.

The Maine Charter School Commission has rejected applications from virtual charter schools four times because of concerns about the quality of the education and their business practices.

This is certainly not the time to divert even more money away from our public schools. The governor is taking money out of our classroom and pushing it towards for-profit corporations.

We should be making our public school classrooms the best learning environments they can be. We do that by supporting our teachers and providing our schools with the tools – and yes, the dollars – they need. That's what we need to grow our economy and meet our obligation to our kids.

We need to remember students like Maggie Stokes, the fifth-grader from Oakland. She told lawmakers that it's frustrating that the state keeps cutting funding for education. She reminds us, wisely, that she and her classmates are the future of Maine.

This is Representative Gay Grant. Thanks for tuning in.

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